

Tar Creek cleanup contract scrutinized; Oklahoma's attorney general Pruitt outlines 17 inquiries
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MIAMI, Okla. - An investigative audit into a Tar Creek trust authority is looking at possible infractions involving a contract awarded for cleanup work, according to a document released Monday by the state Auditor and Inspector's Office.

In a letter dated April 21, 2011, from Attorney General Scott Pruitt to state Auditor and Inspector Gary Jones, Pruitt outlines 17 inquiries into the Lead-Impacted Communities Relocation Trust and its involvement with a reclamation contract.

Trust Chairman Mark Osborn said the trust has been the subject of an audit beginning Aug. 25 but that he could not comment further. Andy Lester, attorney for the trust, declined to comment.

"The audit is in the final stages and should be presented to the attorney general within a month," Jones said. "Since the audit was requested by the attorney general, it is not subject to the state's Open Records Act."

Jerry Morris, state director for U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., sent a memorandum that expressed "certain concerns brought to the attention of the senator and his staff pertaining to the awarding of certain contracts for reclamation of properties in the Tar Creek area."

Morris referred questions to Coburn's communications director, John Hart, who said Coburn "was concerned about the possible misuse of funds, so he turned information over to the proper authorities who could investigate the matter further."

The questions center on the bidding process regarding the Property Improvement Clearance Project that was awarded March 24, 2010.

Inquiries were also sought concerning possible Open Meeting Act violations and the bidding process in the reletting of the contract through the Department of Central Services, the letter states.

The 40-square-mile area in northern Ottawa County remains a hotbed for countless environmental problems.

The trust was formed after a 2006 Army Corps of Engineers study showed that the ground above abandoned lead and zinc mines in Cardin, Picher and Hockerville, known as the Tar Creek Superfund site, had a high risk of caving in. More than \$46 million was spent buying out homes and businesses. The relocation plan involved 878 buyout offers.

The trust is also involved in litigation regarding buyout offers.

Earlier, trust officials said the buyout offers were greater than the 2005 state-sponsored buyout. Buyout offers in 2005 averaged \$54,000, whereas the federally funded buyout averaged \$65,624.

Before the buyouts began, Picher had 1,640 residents and Cardin had 150 residents, U.S. Census records show.

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